



Sufism was quite popular in Turkey, Iran and in the countries to the east of Amu Darya, an area historically referred to as the Trans-Oxus. Many Muslims from the former USSR were followers of Sufism, which has played a very important role in keeping Islam alive in their countries during the Tsarist as well as the Communist era.

The point most forcibly stressed by Sufism was that beneath the form of religion, there operates an underlying spirit of revelation which must be given preference over the form. What the Sufis understood to be the underlying spirit was simply the ultimate goal which all religions strive for. The ultimate goal was identified as the love of God and communication with Him. Hence, to them, if you reach this goal somehow with or without adherence to the form, the purpose will be served and that is all that is required. All the Sufis however, did not abandon the form altogether and kept subjecting their lives in accordance with the laws of Islamic *Shari'ah* as they understood them. Yet they would spend most of their efforts not engaged in formal worship but repeating certain attributes of God day in and day out to help focus their attention entirely to the memory of God. Such practices, at times, drifted close to the yogic practice discussed in the section on Hinduism. Sometimes new ways and modes of remembrance were innovated by different Sufi saints, which, finally, got almost entirely divorced from the well-established *Sunnah* of the Holy Founder of Islam. Yet the followers of such Sufi sects adhered to them more passionately and vehemently than to the Quranic teaching itself. Thus, new schools of Sufism cropped up at different times and in different countries of the Muslim world.

The purpose of this exercise is not to go into a detailed account of the development of Sufi thought—or the schisms which appeared among the Sufis later on—but one thing which most clearly distinguishes Sufism in Islam from all other similar practices is the unshakeable belief of the Sufis in the continuity of revelation or their communion with God. In fact, all the eminent Sufis in Islam have claimed to be in constant communication with God and many a revelation bestowed upon them has been recorded in authentic books. Yet there are some among the Sufis who have broken all ties with the fundamentals of Islam. To them the purpose of religion is only to lead man to God and the forms of worship have become redundant for those who have already achieved this purpose. They introduced certain mental and spiritual exercises with the claim that they were sufficient to establish a sort of communication between man and God which is sometimes described as an awareness of oneness with Him. It did not take long for music and drug addiction to find their way into this school of Sufism, to break them loose from reality to drift aimlessly into a world of delusion. However, all Sufi movements did not start their journey with innovations, though, very often they were led to them during their decadence later on.

There are four major well-established and highly revered sects of Sufism which also deviated from the path of *Shari'ah* with the passage of time. Yet as for their founders, their loyalty to

the Holy Quran and the *Sunnah* remained unquestionable and uncompromising. These major sects are *Chishtiyyah*, *Soharverdiyyah*, *Qadiriyyah* and *Naqshbandiyyah*—which are further divided into many other sub-sects. They all stress the importance of abstinence and austerity to facilitate the attainment of truth. Initially, these practices were not a substitute for the traditional Islamic observances, but were carried out in addition to them.

Gradually the Sufi understanding of the creation-creator relationship began to be influenced by such philosophies as were alien to Islam. For instance, the influence of classical Greek philosophy can be traced in some Sufi sects. The Greek notion of pantheism was adopted in a modified form by some Sufi sects, though strongly opposed by others. The opponents of pantheistic tendencies stress that there is a clear and distinct separating line between God and His creation. According to them though the creation bears a stamp of the Creator and reflects Him, yet it is not diffused with His identity. By contrast, some other factions believe that because the whole universe is a manifestation of God, there can be no clear distinction between the Creator and the creation. For them, creation cannot be separated from God because His attributes are inseparable from the nature of all that He has created. No separating line can be drawn. Hence God is the universe and the universe is God. Yet He has His own independent Will, which works like the natural properties in matter.

At first sight this view of the universe may appear to be entirely pantheistic, in which God is everything and everything is God. But a significant difference should be noted. The pantheistic notion of God is not one that recognizes an externally existing Conscious Creator, a Being who communicates with man through revelation, who takes interest in their trials, tribulations and joys and offers them guidance. The Muslim Sufis, in contradiction to the classical pantheistic view continued to believe in the independent identity of God who, though reflected in His creation, was also the Creator.

As for the Sufis' temperament, they were seldom inclined to fierce, strongly worded debates. They often practised moderation in their belief, while respecting and tolerating views opposing their own. The same cannot be said of the orthodoxy which grew progressively jealous. Hence most sufi sects had to encounter extreme hostility at the hands of the orthodox clergy. Very often there arose a countermovement from among the orthodoxy. Every Sufi sect had to encounter similar experiences of extreme hostility from time to time. The Sufis who adhered to the pantheistic concept of God were specifically targeted by the mainstream clergy for their wrath. At times they were even condemned to death and brutally murdered. Their protestations that their pantheistic philosophy in no way compromised the unity of an independent Supreme Creator were of no avail and they were roundly condemned for claiming to share godhead with God. Hence the orthodoxy often resorted to perpetrating crimes of persecution against them.

The case of the renowned Sufi, Mansoor Al-Hallaj, would serve a befitting example of how such Sufis were treated for their alleged proclamation of being God themselves. He was condemned to hang by the neck for shouting in ecstasy '*Anal-Haq, Anal-Haq*' (I am the Truth, I am the Truth). The orthodoxy understood this to mean that he was claiming to be God himself, whereas he had proclaimed in his sublime spiritual ecstasy, simply a total annihilation of himself. What he meant was that he mattered naught; all that mattered was He (God). Mansoor Al-Hallaj climbed the gallows with his head held high, not the least daunted by his imminent death. Nor could his shouts be drowned in the tumult of abuses which were hurled at him; they rose loud and clear and high '*Anal-Haq, Anal-Haq*' until his soul departed to the fountainhead of his life on high.

Another Sufi sect was born on the issue of whether the external universe was a fact or merely an impression of the mind. This in fact was an age-old question which was even addressed by Plato and Aristotle. It could not come to a conclusion then, nor could it be concluded by the Sufis. Still it is a live debate among philosophers. No contemporary philosopher can ignore it because neither time nor space can be visualized without the coming into play of the human mind. A mad man's imagination seems as real to him as a scientist's observation of the laws of nature in action. Examined from such angles, these problems appear to be insoluble.

Again, every person's impression of the external universe is different from that of others. However, some perceived images of the elementary world around us and the understanding of their properties are often shared by most observers. For example, most people would agree about the definition of an article as simple as a chair or a table. Yet there are numerous other common things about which people may not necessarily agree with each other. For instance, the colour of things may appear different to people with different eyesight. Similarly, all faculties which we possess are not shared equally by everyone else. Sense of smell differs, so also the sense of heat or cold varies with every person. Moreover, a change in the point of observation will present a different visual percept to the same observer. Hence the perception of the same thing by the same observer will vary with the change in point of perception. Add to this, different moods and different states of health, the problem would be immensely multiplied. No objective truth would seem to completely agree with the subjective truth which people fathom within their brains. In short, subjective impressions cannot always be related to the outer world in exactly the same way. This, in the opinion of some philosophers, deprives the viewer of the possibility of ever achieving absolute certainty in relation to whatever he perceives.

The aspect of uncertainty and unreliability of impressions as mentioned above, gave birth to another Sufi sect which totally denied the outer existence of things and claimed that eternal truth was merely a subjective notion. Those who were more extreme among them totally denied the existence of any external physical form, including their own. Thus, an intellectual movement that started with an attempt at an extra fine discernment of detail and perception of outside reality ended up in utter madness. Yet there was a strange magic in this madness, that sometimes spellbound the wisest of the logicians and the academics of their time.

An interesting episode is related about a renowned Sufi leader of this sect, who was summoned to the court of a king to hold a debate with some of the outstanding scholars of his time. But to the amazement and chagrin of all, the outcome of the debate turned out to be exactly the opposite of what they had expected. Within a few exchanges of arguments and counter-arguments the great academics were driven out of their depth, gasping for their breath and groping for words. None could succeed in matching the intricacies of the Sufi's ethereal logic. At this point, the king was struck with a brilliant idea and ordered the warden of the elephants' house to have the most ferocious of his elephants brought to the palace grounds. This particular elephant happened to be stricken with a madness no less than that of the Sufi. The only difference perhaps was that in the Sufi's mind the outer reality did not exist. But the elephant wanted to destroy all outward reality himself. From the one end the Sufi was pushed into the open and from the other the elephant was let loose. The Sufi without losing his breath, ran for his life forthwith.

Observing this, the king shouted from the balcony of his palace, 'Don't run away O Sufi, from this phantom elephant. He is only a figment of your imagination!'

'Who is running away?' shouted back the Sufi. 'It is only a figment of your imagination.'

Thus ended the predicament of the Sufi but not the debate itself. It still rages on.

Hazrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad - Khalifatul Masih IV. *Revelation, Rationality, Knowledge & Truth*. Islam International Publications Limited, 1998. [25 - 31](#).